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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the process of tenure using various conceptions of narrative as the interpretive lens for considering the meaning of achieving tenure. It first examines tenure as narrative performance, noting when, where, and in what context tenure is discussed. The paper then looks at tenure through Donald Polkinghorne's (1988) analytical framework for considering narrative, which includes living the narrative, telling the narrative, and interpreting the narrative. Next, the paper focuses on tenure as story, noting the few frameworks for telling tenure stories, such as advice to the untenured and the announcement of tenure or its rejection. Finally, the paper looks at tenure as the archetypal quest narrative, noting that tenure often becomes a point of redefinition rather than an arrival. Much of the discussion focuses on the author's own attitudes and feelings concerning tenure and the tenure process. (MDM)

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She Learned the Meaning of Life But Forgot It before She Could Say It: A Narrative Analysis of the Process of Tenure

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She Learned the Meaning of Life But Forgot It before She Could Say It

The purpose of this paper is an analysis of the process of tenure using various conceptions of narrative as the interpretive lense for considering the meaning of achieving tenure.

A central career milestone in the lives of academics is the achievement of tenure. As I have trudged toward and been threatened and consumed by achieving this goal, as most conversations about my future have been modified by a reference to this status, it has always been a cloud of mist and fog on my future as an academic. My colleagues and I have counseled together about what it meant, about how to achieve and defeat it. Each year as another colleague achieved tenure, I have been struck by their overwhelming silence on the subject. Suddenly they had no story to tell. In fact, when asked about it they no longer appeared to remember the angst and pain with which they had approached tenure, nor their anger at the institutional games they had reported in the past. They seemed to no longer remember or feel connected to the accounts of the process they had provided, in some cases just months before.

I now approach that great divide: on one side stand the untenured and disenfranchised on the other stand the tenured. As this abyss has drawn nearer, I have been struck by the ways in which various theories of narrative provide analytic tools not just for questioning this process but also for accounting for the lack of meaning in the achievement of tenure. In this paper, I will outline the aspects of the approach to tenure a particular conception of narrative might provide insight for and then critique the narrative of tenure from that perspective. I have

titled these analyses Tenure as narrative performance, Polkinghorne's three levels of the narrative of tenure, Tenure as a Story, and Tenure as Archetypal Quest.

Tenure as narrative performance

Oral narratives are spoken within certain contexts, to certain people, for certain purposes (Bauman,1986). Usually this implies an audience, a speaker, and a context. The context usually occurs as some aspect of community life sometimes formalized and sometimes not. The community usually has unwritten but mutually acceptable patterns of storytelling within that community for certain purposes.

As I considered tenure as narrative performance, I was puzzled by the idea of audience. For it seemed to me that almost the only audience for tenure narratives were untenured faculty. My institutional experience may indeed be warped, but I have never heard tenure faculty members say to each other. "Well, let me tell you about how I got tenure" unless of course there was an untenured faculty member in the room. On the other hand, we do tell each other stories of dissertation defenses, job searches, and other shared processes of academic life. Compared to discourse generated about other life milestones like graduation, marriage, first teaching experiences–narratives about tenure and its accomplishment are pretty shallow. This thing which consumes the lives of young academics produces relatively little discourse among those who have achieved it (except when tenure is threatened then we hear a loud lament from those with tenure–a claim to deserving this special privilege). Unlike a group of new mothers, new fathers, recent graduates, or divorcees there is not a group of recent tenured faculty

congregated at conventions to swap stories about "the big event". In fact, it seems that there is "the big announcement"–"X got tenure", wild clapping and then everyone goes on. Think of a similar crowd when it is announced that "X got married" the same polite applause but the announcement usually generates stories of marriage within the crowd. No one asks, "Wow! How did you do it?" Nor says, "Let me tell you about my experience." Because the process is secret and no one is really sure how they achieved tenure. No one is exactly sure how the various commitments, publications, projects, and evaluations intertwined to achieve tenure.

The audience for tenure stories are predominantly untenured faculty. Thus, narratives about tenure are often couched as advice or I had it easy or you think you have it hard stories to be told to the untenured. They seem to have something in common with scarey stories told at youth camps or children's sleep overs (They seem calculated to scare the children and promote superstitions). They are to be told to a naive audience that is already frightened by the dark–because the process is and remains secret. The terror is not in what will happen if you do not get tenure, but in what you must do to achieve it. So there is the five publications a year, one or more yearly or multi-year grants from an outside funding agent, perfect scores on student evaluations, and appointment to committees which never have junior faculty appointed or the caution about doing too much service advice cycles. If you are a true overachiever, then there are the cautions of doing too much, in too many areas, and not looking "focused" or "scholarly". There are the appeals to collegiality and the importance of being part of the community–but how does this occur. You just "get along". Accompanying this are mentions of people (now absent) who did not get tenure–why? No one is really sure, but it has something to

do with a deep personal failure–a character flaw of some kind.

Couched in the advice narrative, hidden under the list of dos and musts are often kernel stories of pain (the beaten-up disbanded faculty scattered hither and yon, the obtuse or curmudgeonly mentor who inflicted inappropriate pain, the attempts at collegiality that backfired, the unappreciated service, the missed family life–including the failed marriage and the wayward child). Underneath the list is the nebulous message of no matter how much you sacrifice or how much you accomplish it may not be enough and more importantly that if and when you do achieve tenure there is a period of mourning for all that you inappropriately and unnecessarily gave up to achieve something that probably could have been had with less pain, less compromise, and which in and of itself gives little joy.

What about the stories of those who did not get tenure? We do not tell those stories often. Mostly we are too uncertain about what life under such a cloud might be like. If they end up better off than us–then why are we so worried and if they end up in despair, we do not want to dwell too closely on that.

One of the problems in fact with the lack of richness in tenure stories is that the telling of the tenure story is written rather than oral and so we never get to "see" the audience response to the story. We prepare documents that tell the story which we hope will get us tenure. Such documents usually begin not with "Once upon a time" but with "The professional Statement". This statement is usually a lie based on a distorted view of what it is or might mean to have a scholarly vocation. These statements we are colluded into manufacturing not because we believe it even seek what it states but because like "once upon a time" we believe

that is the one pattern for telling the story which we have often been coached in. It is as J.V. Cunningham asserts about achieving a Ph.D.: "We learn not what to say, but how the saying must be said."

Each time we practice telling the story for tenure(at reviews) the community we will one day join is compelled to find someway in which our telling of the story is inadequate. The community must have a paper trail just in case they decide we don't measure up at tenure time. Thus, we do not get much feedback about how our story works as a whole–we do not get practice in shaping and refining our story and the audience feedback for our story is shallow and non-specific. Sort of like Lou Grant's advice to Ted Baxter on the old Mary Tyler Moore Show.."you know how you are Ted? " "Well don't be that way."

We do not have access to the most important part of the story, the way in which our prowess as story teller, convinced our audience that we won the prize.

One of the ways in which we learn to tell stories of marriage, divorce, graduation, dissertations, and other milestones in our lives is that we listen to these stories told not just to children but to adult members of the community. From them we learn the patterns and frameworks that are appropriate for the telling of such stories. We have opportunities to try out various kernels of our own stories and get feedback from laughter or sighs about the appropriateness of the frameworks we are using. There are few frameworks for tenure stories except as scarey advice to junior faculty. We assume, or at least I did for a long time, that perhaps like childbirth these stories were saved to be shared only among the initiated–but I find that tenure stories have little merit among stories of academic life. In fact, the achievement of

tenure may not even appear in the life history of an academic. For if tenure is achieved there is no story to tell.

Oral narratives are told in a community. Stories told or not told in a community reveal as much about the community as they do about the teller. Painful tenure narratives are an indictment against the community and that is troubling when they are told in the community where they originated. It is troubling when they are told outside that community. They are troubling for the community they are told in–because in order to reveal the details and construct a narrative of self with which the teller can live they must represent the teller and not the community in the best light and so stories of failed tenure are stories of the community where they are told. They call into question the same issues in the community they are told in as they do about the community they are told about. When we hear stories of community collusion and betrayal, we are reminded of the old Pogo Cartoon–We have met the enemy and he is us.

Polkinghorne's Three Levels of Narrative

Donald Polkinghorne provides an analytic framework for considering narrative which includes living the narrative, telling the narrative, and interpreting the narrative. While we are living the narrative, as untenured faculty we attempt to hit the ground running–necessarily the rest of our lives is put on hold. We hear unmarried or married females or two career couples speak with longing of "wives" who will somehow handle and keep from our concern the myriad details that need attending to if we are to live whole lives. We find ourselves delaying our lives,

setting aside talents we have practiced for years, spending hours and hours in our offices trying to be productive, preparing for teaching or pacifying students, and running from one meeting to another trying to achieve this thing we are so unsure of "tenure." In my first years of academic life, one of my students whose father was a colleague came to my office for help on a project. When she saw the photos of my children she begged me to spend time with them. I used to know my father she said, "When he was a student, he spent time with me. But then he got to be a faculty member and he had to get tenure and then he had to write the book so we could go to college and then and then. Now I'm ready to leave home and he has time for me. Go home and play with your children."

Though I have many positive experiences from those early years as an academic–in my heart and soul they feel so dark.. Polkinghorne says that before we can tell a story we must live the story. Those lived stories as we search for what it means to be an academic and how to live an academic life have much selfish self-denial in them and little meaning.

The problematics of telling the tenure narrative were alluded to in the section on Narrative as Performance. The telling of the tenure narrative is very public. We construct what we hope is a compelling account of how we lived our lives as academics which makes us worthy of tenure. But the story is an antiseptic one–there are only certain things about which comment can be made and such comments can be structured in only certain ways. We must talk only about scholarship, teaching, and service. But even within those categories only certain materials are to be included. We are often asked to delete richer and more complex accounts of teaching in favor of a set of student evaluations for each course accompanied by a table and a

few explanatory paragraphs which lie about what we plan to do to improve our teaching in response to these evaluations. These may be accompanied by evaluation letters prepared by department chairs or colleagues who have viewed our teaching. We are asked to simply list the committees we have served on and in limited ways talked about what we did on that committee. In my own tenure documents, in talking about the problems of teaching future teachers and being confronted with the students' resistance, I made the statement that being a teacher was mentally and emotionally demanding and that I wanted students to understand that so that if it was going to be too difficult they would chose to do something easier like "Law or brain surgery." Because the president and provost at our institution were lawyers, my committee insisted that I remove the statement because it might be considered insulting to them. I was also asked to delete student work which I had provided to demonstrate the kinds of learning students were achieving because the work was too bulky. When one of my colleagues prepared her tenure box, she took out all of the files and underneath on the bottom interior of the box she put her real narrative of tenure and representation of the demands it had made on her. Then she put the files back completely hiding the true story of tenure.

Finally, interpretation. I have little to say about the interpretation of the tenure story, because the person applying for tenure is never there or in anyway privy to the process of the interpretation of the tenure documents. We are presented with a summary statement that either grants or denies tenure. We are sometimes allowed to see the letters from department committees, department chairs, college wide committees, and deans or associate deans that go forward with our documents but usually not. We are sometimes allowed to read outside

letters because the writers send us private copies but usually not. And so our interpretation of our story as presented to the committee which is in and of itself a very narrow and limited representation is even more limited and narrow.

Tenure as Story

There are only a few frameworks for telling tenure stories (Lord, 1981). One is advice to the untenured. Two others are the announcement of tenure or its rejection. The story for achieving tenure is, "I got tenure." end of story–there is no richness in going on for we are unsure of the strengths or weaknesses or pieces of the formal story or informal story which lead to this accomplishment–we have no idea what to put forward as evidence. To see the starkness of the available elements for this story, contrast it with what can follow the statement, "I got married." or "I had a baby." If the story is "I did not get tenure." What follows that must be an indictment of either self or community. And in listening to a "I did not get tenure because" story we are pretty quickly overwhelmed with the understanding that the indictment of community is an indictment of the listener as well. If the indictment is an indictment of self of the caliber needed to account for this incident I'm not sure the person standing before us would not be dripping blood from slit wrists rather than tell the story.

But the simpler insight concerning the meaning of tenure that comes from this simple frame is the notion that stories have beginning, middles, and ends (Carter, 1990; Leitch,1986). What seems to happen as people achieve tenure is that what was once perceived to be an "end" to a story becomes instead a middle or a beginning. If the point at which this story is being told

is just after achieving tenure, then the teller is suddenly caught up in being in the beginning or in the middle rather than at the end of something and so what needs to follow is unclear. What does follow tenure is often a sabbatical, but somehow the two often seem disconnected for the one does not flow into the other. In fact, we may be as uncertain of why we were given a sabbatical as we are about why we got tenure. Thus, when we arrive at tenure, we suddenly realize there is no there there.

Tenure as Archetypal Quest Narrative

When we begin to live the story of tenure, we think of it, like other coming of age experiences, as a hero narrative (Frye, 1957), based in the quest cycle described by Campbell (1949). In fact, it is only when the tenure narrative ends as failure that it can be accurately inscribed as a quest cycle, because then it takes on shades of the ironic or tragic quest. In an ironic quest cycle, the hero is either less than or trapped by the society s/he belongs to. The hero in the tragic quest cycle, while larger than life and better than his (or her) society, has some tragic flaw which leads to the failure of the hero (Frye, 1957). In the quest cycle, heroes attempt to attain and return with a boon for their society. The tragic and ironic heroes are either unable to attain the boon or lose their life or soul in the attempt. The boon which the audience gains from the quest of the hero is understanding: this may be an understanding of the failure, a revelation of the tragic flaw, a revelation of the betrayal of the helpers, or the unworthiness of the boon. It may result in revelation of the bareness of the wasteland community in which the quest was conducted or insight about any of the elements of the quest

cycle.

If the narrator tells the story of failed tenure as a hero story, then the community is revealed as stagnant wasteland and the elements of the quest cycle (helpers, amulets, seductresses) are revealed as tricksters and liars or as specious or insignificant. If the boon the hero brings back to the world is " a lack of tenure" then the narrative casts that as "heroic". Again, like the tragic or ironic quest, the world and the participants must be revealed as barren and filled with hopelessness.

The quest narrative which results in tenure is a comedic not an heroic narrative because it results in societal conflicts being resolved and marginalized members are reintegrated. Like the marriage, which usually occurs at the end of the comedic narrative, the granting of tenure is sort of beside the point and simply counts as evidence that the quest is done and the hero has now reintegrated into society. Frye (1957) claims that the comedic hero is about like everyone else and so for those who struggle toward tenure it becomes a shallow way to tell a story of great sacrifice. Yet, that is the kind of quest cycle it is and so there is not much to tell.

The difficulty with the Archetypal Quest Narrative Frame is that this is the way the story of tenure begins. It begins as a romantic or tragic or ironic quest–depending on the day, and the success or failure the hero is currently feeling. As we experience the quest cycle of setting off to achieve tenure the story we are living and the framework we are using is Campbell's hero cycle (1949). We see the helpers who are tricksters, wise men, earth mothers, seductresses (either positive or negative). The untenured heros are unsure of the advice (have

they really given us the answer to the riddle or is it an incantation that will bring down the wrath of the administrators of heaven). But to the untenured hero, the quest to achieve tenure means something more than simply the opportunity to stay, to be part of this society. It represents for new academics as they begin to tell the story a pinnacle of success. Untenured junior faculty often see themselves as crusaders for all the causes and theories embraced in graduate school which they attempt to defend and create in the "real" world. New Academics struggle to discover the "meaning of academic life" and see themselves emerging as triumphant from the "Nader" or "the belly of the whale". I expected to have something to "offer" the world. I somehow expected when I started that at the achievement of tenure I would be seen as a conquering hero with a boon for society or as the person who restored order, insight and reproductive capability to a wounded world. Untenured faculty are certain that they will be creators of a new richer and better society at best and a productive contributing valued and respected guru of wisdom at the least. Instead, as we near tenure, we come to understand that if we want to be scholars, tenure is sort of beside the point and that we are just starting. What was initially seen as the belly of the whale and the point at which all the signs converge is reseen as one of the amulets, we acquire on our larger quest. We hope that it will protect us as we strive to reach our larger goals. We begin to realize, belatedly, that achieving tenure is not the defining moment of our academic lives because there is no there there. Unlike the completion of dissertation, we have no boon to take away which will enlighten the populace.

Tenure then becomes a point of redefinition (confirmation, initiation, or baptism) rather than an arrival. We decide, at that point, whether our quest was "merely" for tenure or whether

having gained this amulet we will now go forward and strive to achieve the other things that we thought tenure meant. This is truly the middle point in the quest. For many faculty members, it may become the end of their quest for a vocation of scholarship. Having donned the breast plate of tenure–they turn to more mediocre pursuits. A few faculty members, recognizing the fact that there is no there in tenure, redefine the quest and move on to achieve some other heroic measure.

Conclusion

Like my quest for tenure, I am now at the end of my analysis and feel that having arrived there is indeed no there there. I am struck by the idea of institution which encourages young faculty members who show intellectual promise to define as an end something that is at best a middle and is probably a beginning. I am struck by the way in which this totally empty vessel without elixir or promise is held above the head of the neophyte who may sacrifice inappropriately their life and vocation as scholar to a goal of complacency and careerism.

I am sure that those who began this tradition hoped that young scholars as they struggled to achieve tenure would become intellectually engaged in their academic work, established in the scholarly conversations and communities which would enhance and enrich their lives and lead them to embrace the larger quest cycle. But what I have learned more surely is that most young scholars arrive at tenure (tenured or not) with the clear understanding that there is no there there. And with tenure comes the end of anything like mentoring and the young faculty member may feel like Moses confronted by the forty years of wandering in the

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wilderness that lies ahead. Many who achieve tenure feel that the advice Hector gives Paris concerning Helen of Troy in *Troilus and Cresida* applies to all the sacrifice they made to achieve tenure "Leave her brother she is not worth what she doth cost the keeping"

As I approach the announcement of "tenure" or NOT, I wonder how my academic life would be different if I had understood that tenure was a point of confirmation, baptism, or initiation. If I had understood that tenure was a helpful amulet to acquire to protect me while I persued and found answers to the larger questions which intrigued me, how might my progress, scholarly pursuit, family and community life be different now. Would I have acquired the amultet? How can I help those who follow behind me at my institution to see that identifying the questions they want to pursue and studying them, becoming the teacher they want to be, and participating in the community in ways they feel are meaningful might be a more hopeful way to begin.

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